

Book Review

Kusserow, Adrie, *The Trauma Mantras: A Memoir in Prose Poems*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2024. 176 pages.

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I first encountered Adrie Kusserow at *Antropoesía*,¹ an ethnographic poetry workshop, held in 2019 at the Vancouver Convention Centre. She read a draft of her poem “Refugee Christmas Eve” that later would find its way into the titular memoir. At that juncture, I savoured her command of trauma-dripped words as they seamlessly merged with a compassionate candour to co-witness² and co-create other people in their varying states of fragility, contradiction, and messiness. The poem’s depictions of a psych ward in Vermont and the brutality of insomnia’s handiwork come to life viscerally—and hurl the reader into the moment as she comforts a refugee from Sudan³ confined to an isolation room and immobilized “like a fallen blackbird beating against the glass you [that is, the refugee and poem’s addressee] thought you could pass through” (29). This poem and the subsequent memoir, if anything, speak to the possibility of how another form of relationality and anthropology is possible. Everyone in the conference chamber was bewitched by the spark her words shot through their ink-drunk spines and creative sensibilities for what an arts-based methodology could tender and re-world.

Every detail is expertly considered and executed in this tour-de-force anthology of prose poems—which have been thematically collated from Kusserow’s previous writings published across twenty-seven journals that house former iterations of these trauma mantras—the assemblage of which can be momentarily jarring if the reader is looking for a typical linear monograph that coddles them along an explicit chronology. This structure, while it demands more cognitive resolve from the reader to map out the intertextual threads and timelines between segments, is indicative of how trauma bisects narratives and human lives.

From the get-go, Kusserow's text transports the reader into the disarray of the Trauma-sphere (15, 46). The cover artwork and its gilded design, steeped in Buddhist motifs and myths, reinforces the aesthetic power to arrest the viewer that flows heavily throughout this volume's poetic engagements. It creates an expectation of tension: "The spirits' facial expressions [in the cover's artwork] and the paint that drips over them evoke sensations of grief, while butterflies fly above them symbolizing change" (Newton 2019). These twin residues of the *Blind Spirits* (Sherpa 2012) cover cleverly prepare the reader for an introspective and sensory-curdling journey—in the way that they call the reader to be more imaginatively present and aware of themselves.

The core insight of the book lies within how it centres trauma as a discourse—and how social actors can maneuver and co-opt that apparatus to their self-interested ends. For instance, the Global North uses trauma to justify its models of individualism and personhood in a bid to psycho-colonize the Other, rather than seeing how malleable person-specific trauma is within and toward other cultural bodies to conceptualize its diverse mediations across that spectrum ethnographically. The absolute pleasure of this text then comes from how Kusserow challenges these narratives (that is, the hegemony of trauma) and exhibits alternate ways of relating to and depicting adverse events—especially in the subtle promise of post-traumatic growth that waxes and wanes about the pocket nebula of her verse and focusing lines. That versatility breeds hope.

Beyond that, this memoir is an autoethnographic masterpiece that distills a range of vital rhetorical, intellectual, and affective skills in tandem. Moreover, it mobilizes the ethnographic vignette to a novel, interstitial, and sonnet-like form that reaches a final crescendo anchored by a mix of sensory awe and revelation. One such literary peak echoes back to me softly as Kusserow interrogates the assumed uniqueness of the individual psyche:

Over and over they [the students and yogis of the Dalai Lama] need to be reminded—in one year 98 percent of their atoms will exchange for new ones. Thoughts rise and fall like meteorites, fireballs aglow with a feisty energy that eventually fizzles and withers. With each outbreath, the entire cosmos released from the body's cage. (88)

The uncanny ability of Kusserow to skyrocket the reader towards an encounter with the sublime, I feel, is itself priceless. Any anthropologist would be better off having these compositional skills in their immediate toolkit, and I am a firm believer that this adeptness of storytelling and poetry delves far beyond mere

style considerations but also encourages a heightened sense of discipline, self-reflexivity, and positionality. This book is worth your time.

Notes

- 1 This term, “*antropoesía*,” was an intentional nod to Renato Rosaldo (2013, 105), who championed “verse informed by an ethnographic sensibility.”
- 2 This form of co-witnessing held between Kusserow and the refugee addressee is reminiscent of Bracha Ettinger’s trans-subjective border spaces (2006a-b)—where art and interconnection can dissolve petty notions of self and Other in favour of a compassionate stance that interrelates both identities in how they share mutual states of woundedness.
- 3 The poem “Refugee Christmas Eve” refers to this character as one of the “Lost Boys” from the Second Sundanese Civil War, 1987-2005, and explores his experiences of PTSD.

References

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